"The League is dead"

"Long Live the United Nations"

BY THE RIGHT HON. VISCOUNT CECIL

Prefaced by a Tribute to the Author

BY THE RIGHT HON. WINSTON S. CHURCHILL, O.M. C.H. M.P.

ISSUED BY UNA THREEPENCE
A Tribute to the Character and Work of Viscount Cecil

by the Right Honourable

Winston S. Churchill, O.M. C.H. M.P.

ON THE OCCASION OF THE PRESENTATION OF
A BUST TO LORD CECIL AT THE ROYAL INSTITUTE
OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS, MAY 1946

Sir Alexander Cadogan:

Experiences at the League taught thinking people a great deal about what is necessary for any international organisation to succeed. The United Nations is not a perfect machine. Yet I believe that it is a workable machine if we resolve to make it work. We need the willingness to seek the solution of problems on the basis of what is right, instead of bickering over who is right. We need to learn the art of disagreeing, where necessary, without becoming disagreeable.

The problems ahead are immense. The United Nations is far from being all-powerful, yet I would agree with our English poet who said "'Tis not too late to seek a newer world"; and state my belief that the future will go to those who are strong in will to strive, to seek, to find and not to yield.

It is to honour Lord Cecil that we have come here and few eminent citizens of this country more deserve the expression of public approbation.

I always think of Lord Cecil as deeply interwoven in the whole story of the League of Nations, as well as with its British unofficial assistant, the League of Nations Union.

THE LEAGUE

Why did the League of Nations fail? It failed for two reasons. First of all, because the United States, which had played such a great part in its creation, withdrew, as a result of a popular election, and left Europe to fend for itself—which it did, after
a grisly fashion. The second reason why it failed was the responsibility of leading European Governments in the years between the wars. Even after the United States had withdrawn, there was quite enough force, moral and physical force, to have prevented the arrival at the summit of Germany of a monster, a maniac, against whom all the best instincts of the German people were powerless and whom no restraint could bind. There was time, and there was power.

It is a mistake to assume at all that the intentions of the founders of the League, or the intentions, above all, of men like Lord Cecil, were pure pacifism. That is not the conception. There has never been a moment when he and those associated with him would have espoused any theory of the duty of man which did not include readiness to die, or to send others to die and die with them, for the defence of the great and generous causes of mankind.

WAR COULD HAVE BEEN AVERTED

The period between the wars is one of melancholy half-decisions and lack of clear view; but from the moment when Mussolini attacked Abyssinia, as far as the League of Nations Union was concerned, they sprang into full activity and were prepared to draw the sword, not in any cause of self-interest or national interest, but to defend the rights of nations and for the establishment of an orderly system of law and government throughout the world. And from that time forward, as we began to work very much more closely together in 1935 and 1936, we found the League of Nations Union and many of the liberal forces, whose peace-loving focus is unchallengeable, working together with a person like me!

We worked for two things: to get the necessary rearmament of Britain and in the second place to build up a strong, effective band of nations who would confront Nazi Germany with the deterrent of an antagonism which might well cause any nation to pause. And we know well that there were forces in Germany which were struggling to hold back Hitler in his mad career. I do not take the view that there are Pariah nations and that all of any great branch of the human family are evil. Do not forget that the Germans twice voted at elections against Hitler by a majority, and if there had been a reasonable strength on the part of governments supporting the League of Nations and a clear indication that his methods of violence would not succeed, and that his rearmament would not be allowed, I have no doubt that changes would have taken place in Germany itself which would have had the effect not only of saving the world those horrors through which we have passed but would also have saved Germany from the awful fate which has befallen her.

Even in 1936 it was not too late, if there had been enough energy and vigour shown. But different ideas clashed and well-meaning people in Britain and in France and in the United States were not able to get that strong focus applied to Germany which would have prevented the catastrophe.
U.N.O. REIGNS

The war came, and with its victorious end came the end of the League of Nations. The League of Nations is gone. "Le roi est mort; vive le roi." The League of Nations is gone and U.N.O. reigns in its stead.

U.N.O. has this supreme advantage over the League of Nations: that the United States is not only in it as a member, but is standing forward in a manner splendid and worthy of the great position they hold in the world: is standing forward as its supreme and prime upholder. We shall not be wanting in any respect in giving all aid to the formation of this world body, and we do it in conditions of hope greatly improved by the accession of the United States.

On the other hand, it would be affectation not to notice that, while the League of Nations had no United States, it also was in its outset a fairly homogeneous and agreed body of associates in the war; whereas at the present time in the new U.N.O. we cannot be blind to the fact that there are grievous and deep-seated divisions. All the same, that is the best place for those divisions to be bridged. It is the best method; and we must, as a matter of life and death, associate ourselves in all respects to strengthen and develop that organisation. And to arm it as far as may be necessary and as far as may be possible for the future.

These two organisations are really two chapters in the same story. The great work which was performed at Paris and Versailles in 1919 of gathering together all those ideas which had long been in men's minds in many countries, and the presenting of the theory and machinery of the League of Nations, this great work has continued, and U.N.O. is its heir. A stronger body has developed out of the weaker, but the ideas and groundwork and foundations are the same.

ARCHITECT AND GUARDIAN

And here is one of the principal architects who has laid those foundations, shaped the stones, and guarded with all his strength and ability, to the utmost effort of his life, the cause which they are intended to enshrine. So I say that he must not feel that his life's work has been interrupted or destroyed by the dispersion of the League of Nations, because in U.N.O. he has a more formidable champion, which carries forward his ideas and a large part of his inspiration to deal with the anxious problems of our future.

I count it a great honour to have been invited by you to come here today and to present this bust to Lord Cecil. This fine bronze represents the feeling of his contemporaries who know him well, towards this eminent, upright, disinterested, far-seeing, citizen of the British nation and the British Empire. It represents that expression of opinion which we all desire to demonstrate, and we earnestly hope that he will feel that in receiving it he is receiving a symbol which marks not a life of effort only, but a life of effort which has carried an immense cause of world law and world peace one long lap forward on its road to achievement.
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Long Live the United Nations
by the Right Honourable Viscount Cecil
DELEGATE OF THE UNITED KINGDOM TO THE FINAL
ASSEMBLY OF THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS, 1946

FAREWELL
The purpose of my intervention on the present occasion is to say a few words of farewell to an institution with which I have been connected since its birth, and even before its birth.

My mind goes back more than twenty-five years to the first meeting of the Assembly of the League in the old hall of the Salle de la Reformation. I see again the hall crowded with representatives of the different countries, most of whom were seeing one another for the first time.

I remember it was at the outset rather a chilly audience without any cohesion or corporate life. Speeches were made and business was done, but it was still merely a collection of individuals. And then someone drew attention to the plight of Armenia and suggested we ought to help her.

Instantly the whole atmosphere altered. Resolutions were brought forward. Objections which were made were overruled —note this—on the ground that they were not worthy of the League, and we decided to come to the assistance of the oppressed.

From that moment the spirit of the Assembly changed. It began to live, and what came to be known as the “atmosphere of Geneva” came into existence.

TWENTY WASTED YEARS?
We may well ask: What then is left of the great adventure on which we then embarked?

It is common nowadays to speak of the failure of the League. Is it true that all our efforts for those twenty years have been thrown away? I had a letter from our present Foreign Minister, Mr. Bevin, the other day, in which he said he could not accept that view, and I am sure he is right. The work of the League is clearly and unmistakably printed on the social, economic and humanitarian life of the world.

But above all that, a great advance was made in the international organisation of peace. There was indeed nothing new in the idea; for ages past at the conclusion of great wars men had asked whether something could not be done to stop the senseless slaughter of men and the destruction of their works,
because one State had quarrelled with another. But nothing practical was accomplished. Peace was praised, but war was practised.

At last, by the Covenant, a definite scheme was set up. It was not, indeed, a full-fledged federation of the world—far from it—but it was more than a pious aspiration for peace embodied in those partial alliances which had closed many great struggles. For the first time an organisation was constructed, in essence universal, not to protect the national interests of this or that country—do let us remember that—but to abolish war.

We saw a new world centre, imperfect materially, but enshrining great hopes.

An assembly representing some fifty peace-loving nations, a council, an international civil service, a World Court of International Justice, so often before planned but never created, an International Labour Office to promote better conditions for the workers. And very soon there followed that great apparatus of committees and conferences, striving for an improved civilisation, better international co-operation, a larger redress of grievances and the protection of the helpless and oppressed.

NO LEAGUE—NO UNITED NATIONS

Truly this was a splendid programme, the very conception of which was worth all the efforts which it cost. For ten years the League advanced, but, as we know, it failed in the essential conditions of its existence, namely, the preservation of peace and so, rightly or wrongly, it has been decided to bury it and start afresh. That does not mean that the work of twenty years goes for nothing, far from it. All the main ideas I have briefly sketched remain. True, there is a new organisation. It is founded on a Charter and not on a Covenant. The Charter contains certain provisions and in one respect it is certainly an improvement. It recognises more clearly than did the Covenant that in the last resort peace must be enforced. That was no doubt implicit in the League, as anyone who reads the Provisions of the Covenant will agree. However, in the condition of public opinion when the League was founded, this was necessarily kept in the background. It is only right to recognise that the French Representatives from the earliest times never ceased to urge greater clearness and definiteness in this. And now their opinions have prevailed and the negotiators of San Francisco used much ingenuity to provide for greater force to resist and crush aggression. They have given to the Five Great Powers special rights and, more important, special responsibilities in this respect. Let us hope that their scheme has not forgotten the Latin warning: "Quis custodiet ipses custodes?"

It is true that the support of the Great Powers is essential to peace and it is no less true that there can be no formidable war unless a Great Power takes part in it.

But I have no wish to discuss the detailed provisions of the Charter or the Covenant. It is enough for my purpose to insist that but for the Great Experiment of the League, the United
Nations could never have come into existence. The fundamental principles of the Charter and the Covenant are the same and it is gratifying to some of us that, after the violent controversies that have raged for the last quarter of a century, it is now generally accepted that peace can only be secured by international cooperation, broadly on the lines agreed to in 1920.

GOVERNMENTS, NOT PEOPLES, FAILED

Why then did it fail? Its failure was not due to any weakness of the terms of the Covenant. To my mind it is plain beyond the possibility of doubt that it failed solely because the Member States did not genuinely accept the obligation to use and support its provisions. That was due to several causes. Speaking of my own country, I must admit that the general current of official opinion was either neutral or hostile. I suspect that was also true in other countries. I will not go into the reasons for this, but anyone who lived through those years will agree that it was so. There were other causes but that alone was enough to prevent success. It was not so much that the principles of the League were rejected. Few people hated it. Most people desired peace. But Governments seemed to think that all that they need do was to give a general and somewhat tepid approval to its work and, if that was not enough, it did not very much matter. They forgot that we were fighting an ancient institution which had existed since the beginning of history and that round it had grown up romantic views of war, that poets and orators loved to praise the glory of martial deeds and that national sovereignty involved the right of fire and sword in favour of anything that might be called national interests. We had not yet had the patient investigations of Nuremberg to show us to what fearful lengths opinions of this kind may drive the rulers of a country. In a word, inter-war opinion greatly underrated both the danger of the international situation and the difficulty of applying efficient remedies.

IS THE LESSON LEARNED?

I wonder if that is sufficiently realised even now. I am not so much afraid of the common people. They seem to me—I speak of my own country, but I believe it to be true of all countries—to be sound enough on these questions. It is the experts who give me qualms. The old view that national safety depends on national preparation seems still very powerful, in spite of our experience of the results of the two wars and the certainty that scientific discoveries, atomic and other, will make any future wars infinitely more disastrous than those we have endured.

Believe me, there is no safety except in peace, and peace cannot be maintained merely and solely by national armaments, however necessary they may be, by each nation seeking safety for itself.

Let us then boldly state that aggression, wherever it occurs and however it may be defended, is an international crime, that it is the duty of every peace-loving State to resist it, and to
employ whatever force may be necessary to crush it, that the machinery of the Charter, no less than of the Covenant, is sufficient for this purpose if it is properly used, and that every well-disposed citizen of every State should be ready to undergo any sacrifice in order to maintain peace.

A CALL TO ACTION

I well remember, when we were debating these questions in the Conference at Paris in 1919, a great speech by President Wilson in which he looked forward to a time when it would be regarded as just as disgraceful to be false to the cause of international peace as it is now to traffic with the enemies of your country. I am afraid we have not yet reached that time, but we in this Assembly may do something to forward it, not only by what we say or decide here, but still more by what we say or do when we return to our own countries. For, in the end, it is public opinion that counts. Governments may be feeble or sometimes dishonest even, circumstances may put into the hands of a few men the power to use or misuse the forces of their country, but, in the end, the last word will be spoken by the great mass of the people, and I am sure myself that they will decide aright if only they are given proper materials on which to form their opinion, especially by full publicity for all international discussions.

Education in the largest sense is necessary. Everywhere organisations should exist for that purpose, whether supported by the State or drawing their strength from the conviction and enthusiasms of individuals.

I venture very respectfully to press upon my hearers that here is a great work for peace in which all can participate, resting not only on the narrow interests of our own nations, but even more on those great principles of right and wrong on which nations, like individuals, depend.

The League is dead. Long Live the United Nations

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